

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND THE SHADOWS: TRAVERSING THE CORRIDOR OF SELF- REALIZATION

RASHMI GUPTA

Professor, I.T.S Engineering College, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an unearthing of the female psyche and an understanding of the ambiguity of life and the protagonist's place in it. A profound study of her novels leaves no doubt about her real concern for women. Her novel *Roots and the Shadows* gives a pragmatic description of women as wife, mother and daughter, their search for identity and sexuality as well. All women characters in the novel are acutely aware of their stifled and restrained subsistence in an orthodox male-dominated society. Trapped between tradition and modernity, they search for their individuality within nuptials.

It focuses in detail on the working of the consciousness of her main protagonist, Indu, an educated career woman who plunges into periods of psychic disturbance due to traumatic experiences in her married life. Nevertheless, the agony leads to a phase of self-introspection and later self-discovery which upholds a new perception of life. Ultimately, she emerges out of the crisis as strong woman willing to compromise with life as it comes.

KEYWORDS: Roots and the Shadows, Quest for Self, Female Psyche, Orthodox, Tradition, Modernity, Self-Introspection, Male-Dominated, Individuality

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande exhibits a sharp psychological insight into the intricacies of the human mind and society. She incorporates themes such as agony of existence, metaphysical void, the fears and trembling of her protagonists whose values, beliefs and structure are jeopardized which in turn stand in the way of the individual's self-realization. For delineating the post-modern dilemma of women, along with housewives she concentrates on career women and the problems they face outside the doorsill of their homes in a male subjugated setup. About women being the focal point of her writings she stated:

Most of my writing comes out of my intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society: it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles conjoined upon me by society.....My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman. (Deshpande: 9)

In her novel *Roots and Shadows*, the main protagonist Indu, is a representative of educated, middle class woman feeling smothered in an oppressive male-dominated and tradition bound patriarchal Hindu Society. She is a rebel who defies the norms by marrying a man whom she loves that too outside her caste. For her, marriage was an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family but she gets disillusioned on finding it to be an entrapment for a lifetime.

She struggles for release from the circumscriptions of the conventional and the conformist institution of marriage. Indu traverses the road of self-realization and in that process returned to her ancestral home after a gap of eleven years after being beckoned by Akka, the authoritarian matriarch, as she is on her deathbed.

Had Akka not summoned her, she wouldn't have had sufficient time for self-exploration and comprehension of the basic truth of human existence. Only after coming here, she realizes that despite her education and exposure, she is incomplete and certainly not different from the breed of women she had forgotten after leaving home.

Indu had become aware of the prevailing injustice in society since her childhood as hers was a traditional Brahmin family headed by Akka. She disapproves of Akka's orthodoxy and rituals. Since her childhood she was told that being a woman she has to submit to her fate. She resented this utterly and voiced her sentiments angrily,

"As a girl they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl.... it is the only way, they said for a female to live and survive." (RS: 158)

So, Indu has to bear the burnt of the suffocation and discrimination made by Akka. As a result she starts fighting against her womanhood. She develops a repugnance to the natural biological functions of the female as mother and has apathy towards bearing a child. She makes every effort to seek a new environment where nobody, especially people like Akka, can exercise their wills on her. She brushes aside all the age old beliefs and superstitions prevalent in the society. After returning to her parental house, she recollects her childhood and adolescence days in a very sorrowful mood and shared her feelings with her cousin Naren,

"My womanhood.....had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day I had grown up. 'You're a woman now', Kaki had told me. "You can have babies yourself. I, a woman? My mind has flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. I was only a child. And then, she had gone to tell me, badly, crudely, how I could have a baby. And I, who had had all the child's unselfconsciousness about my own body, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it. And don't forget she had ended, 'for four days' now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything." (RS: 79)

That is how she had been introduced into the attractive globe of womanhood. Though she is aware of the secondary position women have been condemned to, still she struggled hard to uphold her identity and individuality.

Among the numerous women characters the aged despotic matriarch Akka is worth special mention. At the age of twelve Akka is married to a thirty year old man. For child brides in those days, sex was a kind of punishment against which they could do nothing. She undergoes a physical trauma of rape in marriage but there was no escape from husband then, so she continued to suffer in silence. Deshpande clearly presents the plight of females when Akka tells Atya before the consummation of her marriage: "Now your punishment begins Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels." (RS: 70) Akka's sufferings were short-lived as her husband dies soon.

After returning to her father's house, she wields absolute control over the house and imposes a rigid code of conduct on women in the household. She instructed that no woman in the house should call her husband's name because it not only shows disregard but also reduces his life-span. The drudgery of performing the countless household errands makes their life miserable. They show commendable courage and patience to clear the strewn plates and littered remnants lying

about after the meal, "And women like Kaki even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier." (RS: 73) This depicts the blatant reality that women like Akka are responsible for women's abysmal position as they blindly follow the rotten conventions of patriarchal society. It is they who have successfully and viciously ascertained man's dominance over women in society.

Deshpande has very efficiently put together two sets of Indian women, one is represented by Akka, Atya, Sunanda, Sumitra and Kaki who follow the rules of rituals mutely and strongly believe in the age-old traditions, customs and practices; and the other by Indu who rise up against the man made social codes which generally create a great obstacle in the path of progress of women. Indu's achievements as a modern woman doesn't mean anything to the older generation as their only aspiration in life is to get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren. Though Mini is educated and behaves like a modern educated woman but she lacks the will power and so she has to sacrifice her individuality. Through her, Deshpande also draws attention to the troubles that middle-class families come across in their pursuit for appropriate grooms for their daughters. The search for a man is such a mammoth task that parents become anxious and desperate and at one nod from the man, settle the marriage. That's why Padmini had to accept a groom with heavy, coarse features and crude mannerisms. Her explanation for the same is insightful of the mental ordeal most Indian girls of marriageable age endure,

You don't know what it has been like. Watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhav Kaka running around after eligible men.....And if the horoscope matched there was the meeting to be arranged. And mother and Atya slogging in the kitchen the whole day. And all those people coming and staring and asking all kinds of questions.....And I feeling like as if I had committed a great crime by being born a girl....And finally if, everything was fine, there was the dowry. (RS: 126)

So, woman like Padmini had no choice but to accept and submit unconditionally as if they have been born without wills, or have wills emaciated through a lifetime of abandonment. For them, it is marriage that matters and not the man. Such type of arranged marriage is not a marriage of two souls "but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?" (Arora, Sehgal and Lessing: 61)

Though Indu has come far enough in life in comparison to aforesaid women but she becomes agonizingly conscious of her unpleasant predicament, as her marriage has not put her in a class apart. Jayant, her husband betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. Marriage has subjugated and enslaved her; her feminine instinct is curbed and suppressed. She understood that marriage is not the same thing to a woman as for a man. Patriarchal society labeled the two sexes as different from each other, though one has the necessity of the other. As per Simone de Beauvoir,

This necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality. (p. 446)

Because of this differentiation, Indu loathes her womanhood as she felt hedged in by her sex. She resented it just because it has closed so many doors to her. In the process she has lost her individual self, her identity and wishes. The compelling surroundings had made her weak and subservient as any other wife. She feels unhappy and incomplete in the absence of Jayant, her husband.

“When I look into the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I undress I think of him. Always what he wants.....what would please him. And I can't blame him. Its not he who has pressurized me into this. It's the way I want it to be....Have I become a fluid with no shape, no form of my own...A woman who sheds her 'I' who loses her identity in her husband's.” (49)

She painfully realized that she has been playing the role of a wife to keep her husband happy and satisfied. She wants to articulate her feminine voice through creative writing, but here also her desire was suppressed by her husband's wish to keep on writing what suits the magazine or editor not her own conscience. Despite her aversion, she continued with her job to fulfill Jayant's need of money.

Through the character of Indu, Deshpande has put forth the hindrances to feminine growth brought about by a patriarchal family-structure which produce in women dependence, lack of self-confidence and an incomplete sense of their identity. Indu initially adhered relentlessly to Jayant and to her marriage as she wanted to show to the family and the world that her marriage was a success and so she had put on a mask of an obedient and subservient wife. But by doing this she found herself trapped in the matrix of age-old tradition and could not break her free from its clutches. Jayant who is educated and appears to be a modern man, is only a typical Indian male for whom she has to remain passive and submissive, even in the privacy of her bedroom also she is not led to shed her inhibitions, She tells Naren.

“Jayant, so passionate, so ready, sitting up suddenly and say, ‘no, not now’, when I had taken the initiative...he turns away from me. I have learnt my lesson now. And so I pretend. I'm passive. And unresponsive. I am still and dead.” (RS: 83)...*Just to satisfy Jayant's male chauvinistic thinking that a woman can never have sexual desires.*

She is mentally compatible with Naren and shares with him every detail of her married life. Naren's companionship was so fulfilling to her that she didn't hesitate in surrendering herself to him not once but twice in the novel. She also resolves not to disclose this to Jayant. Here Deshpande exposes the hypocrisy and double standards prevalent in society where man can take sexual liberties but woman doing the same are branded as adulteresses. As per P. Ramamoorthy, it is an exercise of autonomy not adultery,

This sheds a brilliant light on Indu's awareness of her autonomy and her realization that she is not dependent on Jayant. The novel gains its feminist stance in Indu's exploration into herself but it also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human existence.” (124)

Indu's bitter experiences enlighten her that she should listen to the voice of her conscience. She ultimately realizes that she has been running after shadows like Naren, leaving her roots far behind in Jayant. Now she comprehended that Jayant was not the restricting bond which she had so futilely struggled against, in reality she herself was responsible for her own torment. As this fact dawned upon her, she decided that, “Now I would go back and see that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty. Nevertheless I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me.” (RS: 187)

She chose to go back to Jayant with affirm resolution of not sacrificing her individuality. She decided to spend the money inherited from Akka according to her own wish. She emerged as a new indomitable woman who has learnt to conquer her fears and assert herself strongly. She asserts her autonomy as a woman and also an accomplice in the eternal cycle of life. As O.P. Bhatnagar has commented: “In the end, comes the realization that freedom lies in having the courage

to do what one believes is right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere to it." That alone can bring harmony in life.

The acquiescent, timid, and compliant Indu of the early days surfaces as an audacious, challenging, cognizant and insubordinate woman. She resigns from her job, thus challenging the male authority and chain of command. She comes out of her emotional upheaval and feels a sense of hope for subsistence. The novel ends with affirmation of Indu's independence and also the principle of life which is endless.

REFERENCES

1. Arora Neetu, Sehgal Nayantara and Lessing Doris: *A Feminist Study in Comparison*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991, p. 61.
2. Beauvoir de Simone, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 446.
3. Bhatnagar O.P, "Indian Womanhood: Fight for Freedom in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*", unpublished paper.
4. Deshpande Shashi, "*Roots and Shadows*, Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1992. Further references are from this edition and will be indicated in the texts by RS and pagination
5. ----- "Writing from the Margin", *The Book Review* 22, No. 3 (March 1998), p. 9.
6. Ramamoorthy P., "My Life is My Own: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Women," *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, edited by Sushila Singh, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991, p. 124.

